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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000271

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#) [GR](#) [RU](#)
SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH OPTIMISTIC ABOUT HALKI

REF: A. ISTANBUL 231
[1](#)B. ISTANBUL 243

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Jeffrey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. During a July 9 meeting, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (EP) explained the Patriarchate's lack of communication with the GOT on Halki and briefed the Ambassador on the positive July 4 - 6 visit of Russian Patriarch Kirill to Turkey. According to the EP, the GOT has not communicated with the Patriarchate on the issue of reopening Halki seminary and the Patriarchate has not requested a meeting with the GOT to address their requirements for Halki's opening leaving both parties in something of a stalemate. The Patriarch explained that the Patriarchate's relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) began to improve during a meeting with former Russian Patriarch Alexei in October 2008. The Patriarch's most significant concern with the Russian Orthodox Church in Turkey is its request for a church to serve approximately 15,000 Russians in Antalya. Given both the Patriarch's upbeat assessment and the avalanche of government-sourced rumors and statements about a leak, we do have more issues. Absent some catalyst (probably U.S.) there is no guarantee the two sides will actually come together to do a deal. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Ambassador and Consul General called on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on July 9 to discuss the Halki seminary issue. The Ambassador thanked the Patriarch for his presence at the consulate's Independence Day celebration and the Patriarch conveyed his prayers from the ecumenical throne to the "glorious country" of the United States upon the anniversary of its independence.

Halki - A Need for Dialogue

[1](#)3. (C) In response to a question from the Ambassador regarding the recent flurry of discussion within the Government of Turkey (GOT) about reopening Halki seminary, the Patriarch said he was optimistic after reading news articles about the GOT's decisions (Ref A). However, he noted, the Patriarchate has had no official contact from the GOT and only knows what it reads in the newspaper. For Halki to be opened, the Patriarchate must agree on the solution proposed by the GOT. "If Ankara makes a decision with which we cannot agree, it would be a pity," the Patriarch pointed out, "so we do want a dialogue as soon as possible." The Patriarch and his staff have often mentioned to the media and visitors that they would like closer contact with the GOT on this issue, but are still waiting, he said. When asked directly, the Patriarch allowed that the Patriarchate has not requested a meeting with the Ministry of

Education or other components of the GOT on the issue in the last year but is instead waiting for an invitation to meet. The Patriarch noted that he is prepared to go to Ankara at any time, especially if solution currently reported in the news allows for its reopening for the upcoming school year. "We have already lost so much time."

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador commended the Patriarch on his flexibility on the university status of Halki, noting that President Obama is very supportive of the reopening of the seminary. He said that former Ambassador Parris was disappointed because Ankara stopped negotiations ten years ago due to internal bureaucratic obstacles. Despite past unsuccessful attempts to urge the GOT to make reopening Halki possible, the Patriarch is optimistic about this round of internal GOT discussions. "We want to believe this is a new era, with a new just state. We don't want to use the past as a standard for the present or future."

Why the Patriarchate Needs Halki

¶5. (SBU) The Patriarchate used Halki seminary in the past to supply priests to the churches and patriarchates in its ecclesiastic jurisdiction. The seminary includes not only a high school but an institution of "higher" education, which provides four years of liturgical training after high school to prepare students for priesthood. The Patriarch noted that even though this institution is university-level, he would be content even if it were not recognized as a university by the GOT as long as it was open. At this time, the Patriarchate does not have sufficient priests to supply necessary leadership to the churches under its jurisdiction. He cited the example of a recently opened church in Singapore (under

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the Ecumenical Patriarchate) where the diocese cannot find a qualified candidate to appoint as pastor. The Patriarch explained that Halki was unique in its role of producing open-minded Orthodox priests. "We do not want close-minded conservative Orthodox Taliban," he said, but instead a place to train open-minded priests, necessitating the reopening of Halki.

Concept of Reciprocity Unfair to Turkish Citizens

¶6. (SBU) The Patriarch decried the concept of "reciprocity" pushed by some members of the GOT and state which would mandate the provision of greater rights by the Greek government for the Muslim minority in Western Thrace in exchange for the opening of Halki. He contended that to link Western Thrace and Halki is unfair, and affects the human rights of Turkey's own citizens.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill - A Quote Successful Unquote (sort of) Visit

¶7. (C) The Patriarch described the visit of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill on July 4 - 6 as "nice and successful" despite some lingering problems, including Ukraine and potential conflicts in ecclesiastic jurisdiction (Ref B). The relationship took a turn for the better in October 2008 during a meeting in Istanbul of the Synod of all orthodox patriarchs. According to the Patriarch, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) now "finally wants to participate in the convocation of the Great Orthodox Church" and is willing to work toward shared objectives. He was unable to explain why or how the ROC changed its position, suggesting it may be the recent election of Kirill, but noted that the relationship had improved even prior to his election in December 2008. The Patriarchate plans to meet with the ROC before the upcoming meeting of the Holy Synod to define common positions in advance of the meeting.

¶8. (C) The Patriarch said the one question about which the Patriarchate remains concerned relates to the 10,000 - 15,000 Russians in Antalya who are in need of a place to worship. Patriarch Kirill addressed this topic publicly with Prime Minister Erdogan, who responded positively. The Ecumenical Patriarch said he is open to assigning Russian-speaking Greek Orthodox priests to such a church, and has just ordained such a priest, but cautioned Kirill against sending priests directly from the ROC. According to the 28th canon of the 4th Ecumenical Council, which met in 451 A.D., Antalya falls within the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and only the Patriarchate can assign priests to a diocese within its jurisdiction. The Patriarch explained that his concern is not unfounded, citing a recent Russian media article that contended that the Russians in Antalya are temporarily under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. "If the Russian Orthodox Church wants to interfere, then we shall have new problems," the Patriarch said, "and I will defrock any priest sent by Kirill." (NOTE: The Diyanet's Mehmet Gormez told us on July 13 that Kirill had been greatly annoyed that Bartholomew had not met him at the Patriarchate entrance, but only inside his office, which appeared disrespectful -- in contrast to Diyanet Minister Bardakoglu who greeted Kirill on the Ministry steps. Gormez said the Diyanet is well aware of the intense Moscow - Istanbul rivalry over the Patriarch's ecumenical status, which it considered an issue that must be resolved inside the Orthodox church without GOT interference. END NOTE.)

¶9. (C) The Patriarch, in an effort to serve the Russians in Antalya, said he is considering visiting or sending a letter to the Minister of Culture Ertugrul Gunay to request GOT approval for a Russian Orthodox Church served by a priest designated by the Ecumenical Patriarchate. He noted that the Patriarchate has had a good relationship with Gunay. The Ambassador said he would be happy to raise the issue with Gunay should the Patriarch need help.

¶10. (C) Comment: The current flurry of discussion within the GOT and apparent dedication to the reopening of Halki Seminary is promising and presents an exceptional opportunity for a step in the right direction in the area of religious freedom. However, any proposed formula for opening must have the approval of both the GOT and the Patriarchate. An active

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dialogue between the two parties on an acceptable formula for Halki's reopening is necessary but conspicuously absent. The Patriarchate is apparently planning to continue to wait for the GOT to initiate contact regarding the topic even though the start of the coming school year is only a few months away. Thus the need for a catalyst -- a role we are best postured to play.

WIENER